

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Sukeji Yamagata

Sukeji Yamagata, the third child of Heiji Yamagata and Shizuyo Yasuda Yamagata, was born in 1930 in Kealahakua, South Kona, Hawai'i. Sukeji's paternal grandfather, Naotaro, and paternal grandmother, Shige, immigrated to Hawai'i in 1898. Arriving with them was Heiji, their eldest son, who was four years old at the time. Heiji Yamagata was Sukeji's father.

Naotaro became a blacksmith for the Kona Development Company, a sugar company in Kona. He later purchased land and grew coffee and oranges. He also started N. Yamagata Store, selling general merchandise and Kona oranges. The business was eventually taken over by Heiji Yamagata. The store closed in 1960.

Sukeji Yamagata grew up in the home Naotaro built adjoining the coffee and orange fields. He attended Konawaena School and graduated in 1948. After serving in the Korean War with the U.S. Army, he returned to Kona and worked on the family farm for four years. In 1957, he was employed by Union Oil Company in Kona as a truck driver. In 1972, he drove for Coca-Cola Bottling Company. He eventually rose to company manager. Yamagata retired in 1990.

At the time of the interviews, Yamagata lived on family-owned property with his wife, Betty Ege Yamagata. They raised one daughter.

Tape No. 35-20-1-01

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
with

Sukeji Yamagata (SY)

Kealahou, Hawai'i

June 5, 2001

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

[Note: Also present at the interview is SY's wife, Betty Yamagata (BY).]

WN: This is an interview with Mr. Sukeji Yamagata for the Kona heritage stores oral history project. The date is June 5, 2001, and we're at his home in Kealahou, Kona, Hawai'i. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay, Mr. Yamagata, let's start. My first question, I guess, would be when and where you were born.

SY: I was born [in] 1930 in this district, Kealahou.

WN: Tell me a little bit about your parents, where they're from.

SY: Actually, I think we should go back to my grandparents who came over in the year 1898. My grandpa and grandma came together. And my dad was four years old at the time, and he came together with them.

WN: Do you know why they came?

SY: Well, the reason from what I understand is, the people in Japan was not doing too well on the farm, so to better themselves they figured that the opportunity was in Hawai'i. So, when they came over my grandparents got in touch with the plantation and they made a deal with him. They wanted him to decide whether he wanted to work for them as a laborer or on commission basis, so actually he chose the commission basis. I think he must have worked as a sugarcane worker for a while, and since his background was blacksmith he changed around and he saw that the opportunity was there because Kona [Development Company] plantation, they didn't have any trucks or anything else so the mules was the most important transportation. So, he had no problem converting himself to being a blacksmith. So actually, by doing that he made pretty good financially. Then

finally the plantation dissolved and when the plantation dissolved they already had the coffee plantation started, so he must have bought some of those lands and started his business as a coffee farmer. By doing so, but at that time a lot of people was [living] in Kona and he felt that a store was in need, so that's the reason why, I think, he went ahead and put up a store known as the N. Yamagata Store.

WN: So when you say he came here and the [sugar] plantation that he worked for was the plantation here in Kona?

SY: That's right.

WN: Kona Development Company.

SY: Yeah.

WN: Oh, I see. Did he come directly to Kona or do you think he came to someplace else first?

SY: I don't know about that.

WN: Where was his blacksmith shop?

SY: Well, the blacksmith shop was (across the street from) the Yamagata Store. And at the same time, he got into the orange business and he put up another building known as the Kona Orange Warehouse. They were side by side.

WN: Across the street from where we are now?

SY: Yeah, the Yamagata Store was down there.

WN: *Makai* side.

SY: Down here, the open lot was the (store and *makai* house living quarters).

WN: What do you call this lot now? This construction?

SY: Oh, what's the name of that construction [company]? Hokulia?

WN: Hokulia. And where was the house? Where did he live?

SY: Well, in the back of the store.

WN: Oh, okay.

SY: Okay, I don't remember way back, but in my father's day we all worked together. We had a big family, so the store business was really busy and my mother usually run the

store and my dad ran the farm. And we lived in the back of the store, but we had lot of Filipino employees. I think we had the biggest in Kona, we had about fifty of them, all scattered in this area. And they would come buy the merchandise, but they had no money. So what my mom and dad did was get a charge book and he charged them for six months without paying and in return what they had to do pick our coffee and pay whatever they owed the store. That's the way the store was run. And in fact, after the store was built we had another building come up known as the Yamagata Pool Hall. So, I ask my father, "Why was the pool hall constructed over there?"

He said, "Not to make money, but to have recreation for these Filipinos." Because they had no place to go, so what he did was put up a hall.

WN: And where did the Filipino workers live?

SY: In fact, the Yamagata camp is still standing up here. We had them scattered all over the area. At that time we had about seventy acres of coffee in Kona and then we had them break down maybe ten acres to a family and they the ones that pick the ten acres.

WN: So like one Filipino family was in charge of ten acres.

SY: Yeah. Nobody else goes in to pick their coffee. In fact, we had one family, he had fifteen kids and when they picked the coffee they picked maybe fifty bags a day or thirty bags, so we were fortunate to have all these people.

WN: They lived in houses?

SY: Houses, yeah. But the bachelors lived in the camp up here.

WN: By camp you mean like single. . . .

SY: Like the plantation camp. They had rooms, and kitchen.

WN: And your father was the one who set up the houses.

SY: Yeah. I think they got the plantation houses when they broke down [i.e., closed the Kona Development Company plantation, in 1926], you know. In fact, the pool hall was made like that, too. The lumber's still standing.

WN: So much of the land here, used to belong to the plantation?

SY: I don't know about down here, but on the *mauka* area, yeah. My father was always looking in the future, and he seen the opportunity up there when they [Kona Development Company] wanted to sell the land. And from what I understand is he bought those lands for fifteen dollars an acre. Those days that's big money, but you

know, before he died, he kept telling me and my family, "Don't you ever sell the land, pass it on to the next generation. Keep it in the Yamagata family." That's the reason why we still got lands. People usually, they sell the land, but we understand with my parents, "Don't ever sell the land."

WN: So your grandfather was the one who started the store, he was the original person.

SY: Yeah.

WN: And then your father sort of grew up.

SY: Yeah.

WN: Okay. So your father lived along with your grandfather and his brothers and sisters right behind the store.

SY: My grandparents lived, there's another building below the store, that's where, I think they lived for a while before going back to Japan.

WN: How many brothers and sisters did your father have?

SY: My father, he had Clarence, Susumu, Tasuke, and my father [Heiji].

WN: One sister.

SY: Yeah.

WN: And your father was number four?

SY: He's the oldest.

WN: Oh, he was the oldest? The girl was the oldest? Oh, so your father was number two then. The oldest son.

SY: Yeah.

WN: And I know all the brothers went different places.

SY: They were all real successful, you know, because grandparents sent them to school. One became a lawyer [Clarence], dentist [Susumu], and one became vice-president of Bank of Hawai'i. First Japanese American to be vice-president.

WN: Tell me about your father. What kind of a man was he?

SY: Well, he was a very unusual man. It's hard to compare him with a lot of people because he was an inventor—he didn't have too much schooling because he didn't have the opportunity, [although] when he was in Japan he went to commercial school. He came back, he tried to help his brothers go to school, so he stayed back. As I recall, he went into all kinds of businesses to keep the store going. All those years the store wasn't doing so good because all those credit and charging, but he just wanted people to survive. So what he did in order to keep the store going, he had a coffee plantation going. When coffee wasn't so good, he went into the cattle business. Cattle business didn't come too good, so he went into tomato, cucumbers, wasn't so good. He went to raising pigs and chickens. You name it he did it.

But the most successful thing he did for people in Kona was, he was the original guy that invented the coffee dryer. In fact, we still got his dryer down here. Because what was happening, Kona, those days there's a lot of rain. And like us we had large quantity of coffee coming out, and the only way to dry this coffee was to clear a field and [place] thirty or forty *mushiro* [burlap bags] over the coffee. That was our biggest problem because when rain comes, to get the coffee away from the rain we had to put the tarpaulin on it. We had one [field] over here, and one on the other side, we just couldn't do it in time, and the coffee would get wet.

WN: You folks had *hoshidana* [coffee-drying platform with a movable roof]?

SY: We had three *hoshidana*, but wasn't enough. Because we were grinding about 300 to 400 bags. That's a lot of coffee.

WN: This is when you were growing up.

SY: Yeah, when I was growing up. So he's a man that would sit at dinnertime, by himself. He's a chain-smoker, you know. He smokes and he's thinking, always thinking, what he's gonna do, what he's gonna do. Then finally, he got the idea to invent a dryer, so the pains that he went through. I remember he first started out with a box, just a plain box and he put a burner underneath, but he wasn't pleased with it. Too much work. With a box you had to go inside and stir the [coffee]. He wanted something that's going to rotate around and round and round. So, his first intention was to get something small first, before he went to the iron works to develop into a real thing. So what he did was get a Crisco can, and with a nail he punched holes right around the can.

WN: How big was the can?

SY: Just a small can, just to get an idea of what he was trying to do [i.e., a model].

WN: Oh, okay.

SY: Then, he put kind of small little stove underneath and then rotate the thing around, and that thing really was pretty good.

WN: Was it mechanical or was it by hand?

SY: By hand at first, then the next stage was to get a bigger one. So the next one [produced] maybe ten bags of parchment. That was his first, the thing that came out from his idea. And we still got it down there. I got to take pictures before the thing dismantles because it's one of his prized inventions.

WN: How many pounds could he hold in the can at one time?

SY: The small can?

WN: Yeah.

SY: Ah, maybe couple pounds. But the next step was ten bags, it's a little bigger.

WN: Ten 100-pound bags you could fit in one?

SY: Yeah.

WN: Wow.

SY: That was successful. Now, ten bags for us was no good because we had [the equivalent amount of] three *hoshidana* supposed to go in there. So, the next step, he made a bigger one. He went all the way to Hilo and told the [Hilo] Iron Works how to do it. That dryer [would] hold about seventy bags. That's a real big one, so that was real good.

WN: And in turned by hand, or by . . .

SY: No, by belts. And he had converted to, instead of stove, diesel[-power]. Then it really worked out real good.

And his next invention was, you know the orange?

WN: Yeah.

SY: Okay, the orange we had at least 250 trees leased from Ackerman. It wasn't our trees, the Hawaiians planted those foreign trees many, many years . . .

WN: *Makai*?

SY: Straight down here. They had about 250 trees.

WN: So your father didn't plant the trees?

SY: No. They were planted by Hawaiians. Those trees lasted almost a hundred years. In fact, some of those trees are still standing. Those days, the bugs were coming around, so what my father did was [get a] fifty-gallon drum and a water pump—the pumper—to pump the chemicals up to the trees. He had a long stick and he used to spray all that. And that pump was our job manually all day long, pumping. That's a hard job, you know.

WN: How big was the pump?

SY: Well, it's a fifty-gallon drum and the thing goes in and you pump, pump, pump. Manually, because those days never had motor, so we did that for many years. Now, to grade oranges—because people wanted small, medium, and large size. So, he sat at the table trying to figure out how he's going to do it. In fact, the original invention is down at my brother's house. You'll be amazed, what he [father] came out with. He came out with something round like this here.

WN: Like a cylinder.

SY: Yeah, and then from over here he clamped four corners right around, maybe six of them, same size, so when the orange comes from the grinding place, the small ones would drop down. The medium size would go in the next one, and the largest one would drop down here. That's how he graded his oranges, but the setback was we had to do it manually by hand again. We turn the thing, round and round and round. So every day, that was our job.

WN: Still had to pick the oranges by hand, yeah?

SY: Yeah, we had ladders. See that avocado tree?

WN: Yeah.

SY: Just as tall as that avocado tree, orange trees were, so we had ladders going up. Lean on the tree, and the orange tree branches are real strong. They won't break, and you can rely on it. We used to climb the trees, pick it by hand. But another thing, what he did was, to save time instead of getting the basket going up, he made basket on the top with a funnel like thing made out of cloth and the thing would drop all the way to the ground. And what we did was, with the basket we just spin the thing round and around, and when we picked the orange, the orange would come down whirling, whirling, no damage to the orange. So, when you get down there, you know no damage. So that's the way we were picking the orange. And the biggest success from the orange was when the Second World War came on, the army wanted our oranges and they wanted it real bad. So we just had to go pick, even half-ripe ones, whatever came up to

the station up here. The thing just went on the truck and gone. We had four years of good [business].

WN: Was that the only thing that they wanted?

SY: Oranges.

WN: Oranges. So wartime, oranges was good then.

SY: Oh yeah, couldn't keep up.

WN: Were you the only folks that had oranges?

SY: Yeah, in Kona. Kona Orange.

WN: Ackerman owned the land?

SY: Yeah, but Ackerman couldn't handle because they were in the dairy business, and cattle business. They wanted somebody to, instead of letting the oranges go, so my father talked to them. My father and Ackerman were good friends, so whatever opportunity there was, they would talk together because Mr. Ackerman was manager of Bank of Hawai'i.

WN: This is which Ackerman?

SY: (Mr. Walter Ackerman.)

WN: You know, getting back to the coffee-drying machine, was the coffee as good drying in that machine?

SY: At first, you got to experiment. So, maybe my father would put the coffee in too early, you know, too wet. So, the drying process wasn't so good. Because coffee is funny you know. Once you dry, sometimes they come back to the original wetness, you know. So you have to know how long [it takes] to get them really dried up. At the end, it came out real good because one or two years later that machine used was all over Kona. The funny part is, my father didn't get a patent. (Chuckles) He didn't think of those things. No patent on that.

WN: So the people who wanted that drying machine, how did they get it? They just made their own?

SY: No, because my father went to the [Hilo] Iron Works; the iron works had the idea already how to do it, so when people inquired, he made it for them. So mostly everybody got the machine, but on a small scale.

WN: Did they pay your father?

SY: No, no. All *aloha*.

(Laughter)

WN: So, he had coffee and he had oranges, what else did he do or grow?

SY: Well, like I said, tomatoes.

WN: He sold the tomatoes?

SY: Oh yeah, commercially. But he had no background in tomato farming. You know what he did? He bought a tractor, we cleared some land up there, and all the tomato fruits as they bloomed, the flowers, we had to go over there—manually—all the clusters, with [brown] paper bags, we covered it. We put a clipper on it, and put a date on it, so no bugs could go (laughs) and damage the fruit. So when we checked on the date, oh, beautiful tomatoes came out, but a lot of work.

WN: So you put a date on it and you knew from a certain time after this date that's going to be picked.

SY: Yeah, because you cannot see inside. If had cellophane [bags] in those days, you could see whatever's inside, but that brown bag. . . . (Laughs) But, came out nice tomatoes, but I guess he gave it up because the price of coffee came up and gradually was too much work. But he tried everything.

WN: How much of the land went to tomatoes?

SY: Oh, not too big. Maybe couple acres, that's all.

WN: Any other vegetables?

SY: Cucumber.

WN: Who would he sell the tomatoes and cucumbers to?

SY: I think he used to sell them in Hilo or someplace, because I know we had the trucking company used to come, pick up.

WN: So while he was doing this, and you say that you had to do this and you had to do this, you were down in 1930, yeah? So how many brothers and sisters did you have?

SY: All together, six brothers.

WN: Six brothers.

SY: One sister, yeah.

WN: So six boys or seven boys?

SY: Six boys.

WN: And what number were you?

SY: From the bottom I was number two.

WN: So you were number six?

SY: No, five.

WN: Fifth boy, yeah? It seems like you were busy as a kid.

SY: Oh yeah (laughs). But we were fortunate because when the broke out, I remember that on December 7, [1941], we were down in the orange field. We didn't know what was going on, so we came home that afternoon, then the radio was going on saying the war was on. So, the same day that night, two policemen came to our house. They picked up our father right away; they took him to the police station. After that they took him to Volcano [i.e., Kīlauea Military Camp], then to the Mainland. I remember that.

WN: Do you know where on the Mainland he went?

SY: He was in California first, and ended up in Texas someplace. During those days up there [in internment camps], to keep himself busy, he came a carver. In fact, some of his work is in here. See all the chickens, roosters, and turtles over here, all was made by him, you know (laughs).

WN: He just learned on his own.

SY: Yeah. Became a carver; he painted some pictures, too.

WN: So your father came here at age four, and then he went back to Japan. [Heiji Yamagata was born on February 27, 1895.] By himself, or with his parents?

SY: With his mother, I think.

WN: He was educated in Japan.

SY: In Japan.

- WN: Sort of like *kibei*. You know what term *kibei*, where you come to Hawai'i, but then you go back to Japan to get educated?
- SY: Oh. When he got here. it must have been in the 1920s. He came back, took over the store and all that.
- WN: How was his English?
- SY: Pidgin, but we were able to converse, because whatever he couldn't understand my mother was an interpreter.
- WN: Because your mother was nisei, yeah? Born here. [Shizuyo Yasuda Yamagata, Heiji Yamagata's second wife, was born August 28, 1902, in Hawai'i.]
- SY: Nisei, yeah.
- WN: Do you know why he was interned?
- SY: As I go back, looking through the albums, he was involved in just about anything. He was the chairman for just about anything you can think of. You know when the Japanese [naval] ships came [and docked in Kona] before the war?
- WN: Yeah.
- SY: He was the person that sort of greeted them. In fact, I remember one of the biggest events they had. The training ship came over here, he invited them. Below the store over there, there was a big house. The whole crew, he invited them to *lū'au* down there. He was involved in it. And then, he received recognition from the emperor [of Japan], my father had about two of them. Community-wise he was involved with everything.
- WN: During the war was your grandfather still around?
- SY: During the war, 1941? No, I think he went back, I think, already.
- WN: He went back, I see.
- SY: He just went back when I was born, 1930.
- WN: I see.
- SY: I still remember him. Visualizing, down there.
- WN: Oh you do remember him down here?

SY: I met him couple times in Japan. I was in the service. During the Korean War they stationed me in Tokyo and my uncle was in Tokyo, so he took me to Yamaguchi-*ken* down there. I met them, and I was surprised they had a beautiful home down there. And the home was next to the ocean.

WN: What town in Yamaguchi?

SY: Kuka-*machi*, Oshima-*gun*, Yamaguchi-*ken*.

WN: I see.

SY: Before he went back, you know, he was so successful, my grandpa, he owned land in Hōlualoa—Keōpū, they called it. He had forty acres, prime land over there, until about ten years ago. Forty acres!

WN: This is your grandpa?

SY: Grandpa. That forty acres, he divided among his sons. He gave to Clarence, eight acres; Doc [i.e., Susumu], eight acres; and twenty acres to my other uncle. My father was supposed to get some land, but he told them no. But, the most generous thing my grandpa did was, that land in Keōpū, he set aside one piece and he donated the land to the people over there to be made into a cemetery. I thought that was it, but when I got older, I understand he had another [piece of] land down here from [Kona] Hongwanji, below that, he had two acres over there and then he donated the land to the church, but with the understanding that they won't sell the land until my father says that it's okay. So the land was held in check for a long time, then the land price came up and the Hongwanji needed some money to build a judo hall, or something like that. At that time my father was still alive. So, they told them to go ahead and sell it right now. They picked up a pretty good sum, \$50,000, I think, that land that my grandpa donated. So, you know, he left his mark over here. He had more lands at Puakō. Because he was [once] a blacksmith, so when the plantation was gone, he wanted to go into charcoal making. So he had the land over there, and he told all his sons, "Who wants the land over there" he go back Japan. Nobody wanted the land.

(Laughter)

SY: So he went back. Retired at forty-five, he made his millions (laughs). But he was a quiet man, he doesn't say much. I met him in Japan twice. For a Japanese, he was really tall.

WN: Oh yeah?

SY: Six-footer, I think.

WN: How tall was your father?

- SY: I think he was about just as tall as me I think, 5'8", someplace around there.
- WN: So, you were born 1930, and when you were growing up, coffee wasn't very good, eh? It was depression time.
- SY: Nineteen thirty, let's see now. Got some information here. Okay, 1890, sharp rise in price; coffee was good, so that's when Grandpa went into coffee. I think, my days, 1930, well, I was so small, I cannot remember those days.
- WN: Depression, yeah. I know you told me a little bit about your jobs and stuff. What did you do to have good fun as a kid growing up in Kona?
- SY: Well, I was really fortunate because the place we live is centralized. They call it central Kona, because all my friends, they all surrounded me. All my classmates and all that we always stood by each other for fun. In fact, in my gang we had about fifteen to twenty of us and in the morning before we go to school, we always got together at the store. We talk story, play cards, and we used to walk to school every day. And I remember because I love my sports, and the way we had to entertain ourselves is those days, we didn't have any basketball. Tennis ball was available, but I remember my father had a Model-T, so we had a two-car garage, and in the garage we made a basket out of a Crisco can. And we used to play basketball in that area. And since it was war days when I was about twelve, thirteen, there was no field to play in. The [Māmalahoa] Highway was next to my store, so we played football in the highway because we could see the cars coming. Half an hour later or so (laughs), we own the field. Our field was a road.
- WN: This road here?
- SY: Yeah. And we used to go fishing right down here; we walked down.
- WN: You mean the ocean?
- SY: Yeah, we walked down, because no cars those days. Went down fishing.
- WN: Are there trails to go down or what?
- SY: Yeah, we went through Ackerman's [property]. They owned the land right to the ocean, so we went down fishing and all those things. And later on when the war stopped, they had surplus jeeps, then we started buying those jeeps. Then we didn't have to walk anymore.
- WN: Did you have to do chores before you went school?
- SY: Well, after school, because we were so busy those days. Coming back from school we had to grade the oranges and watch the store when my mother was cooking. My dad

wasn't around, so we all pitched in and did all the things that had to be done. We were lucky because all our brothers stood by, never did go anyplace. But one of the setbacks was, since we had to work on the farm, my second oldest brother couldn't volunteer for the army because they classified him 4-F. They wanted somebody to run the farm because my father wasn't here. So, he stayed back and then my other brothers were drafted. The oldest was [a member of] the 100th [Infantry] Battalion. The other one, he just got into the army when the war was over.

But I was too young to be drafted. So when the Korean War came on I was classified 1-A right away. But at the same time, I had one more brother that didn't go into the army because of the farm work, but in the first draft, they took him in the Korean War. He was the first to go to Korea, really, and his time was up. He was supposed to come back, rotation, you know those days. But the Chinese came by the millions and he got caught in the Chinese barrage. But he kept telling us, "No worry, I coming back. I coming back." But he was a machine-gunner, so they wanted him back over there. First he was classified as missing for six months or so, but some of my buddies over here, his friends, thought they saw him get killed.

WN: What was his name?

SY: Nobuji [Yamagata].

WN: This was number---which brother was this?

SY: From the top he was number three.

WN: What school did you go to?

SY: I went to Konawaena High School?

WN: What about elementary?

SY: Yeah, elementary, same. Konawaena Elementary School.

WN: And how was school for you?

SY: Only thing, my fallback was I was too good in sports. I didn't devote my time to studying (laughs). Everything was sports, sports, sports. I was good in basketball, football, track; I didn't have time to study. What went wrong was my gang was always coming to our house and we used to go to the movies. School days, you know, to the movies (laughs) every night. Get to go Filipino show, Japanese show, because the reason was my father wasn't there to control us.

WN: You mean this is during the war?

SY: During the war. So we were free nighttime, because we did our work.

WN: So who was actually running things while your father was gone?

SY: Well, my mom. She did everything. Store, oranges, yeah, she did everything. Cooking.

WN: Tell me something about your mom. What was she like?

SY: Mom was quiet, doesn't give us bad time, she never scolded me. She was always on our side because my dad was stern. You know, Japan style, he's the whip. He tell you to do something, you got to do it right now. Like mom, you know, she always took our side, try to cool him off. But, she was really a hard-working lady, you know, took good care of us. In fact, while we were growing up, because of all the things going on, they had to hire baby-sitters for us. So we had baby-sitters as I was growing up. But she really worked hard. And in fact, the Yamagata family really was close. We had for ten years our Yamagata [family] fishing tournament. [We were] the only [family] that had any kind of tournament. And she was our queen for many, many, years.

(Laughter)

WN: You mean anybody could enter?

SY: No, only Yamagata family [members].

WN: Oh, only the family? The tournament was where?

SY: Down here. And the things we did were just amazing. We had fishing tournament, we had cooking contest, drinking contest. (Laughs) That's why we all got together as one. A lot of families envied us.

WN: How did the cooking contest work?

SY: Oh, the first year was unreal, I couldn't believe it. The first year, I think, we were not down here, but we went to a friend's beach house in Ke'ei—Keālia, they called it. Before we go, we had a meeting and said this year we're going to do something different. We broke into groups and, "This year we're going to have a contest to see who can come out with the best dinner for the tournament, so tonight this one group's gonna cook, and the next night, the next group." So, we stayed Friday, Saturday, Sunday, so one, two, three nights, we had three groups. So, my nephew Gary, he's in Honolulu, he and his wife they really wanted to win the contest, so they went all out. Get kimono and all that kind uniform, they came out, fabulous *kaukau* they come out with (laughs). And one of the members was going to be a waiter, he come and take our order and all that kind. And the food was fantastic! So I was one [group] and I said, "I'm going to outdo these guys, I'm going to make steak, and I'm going to get sashimi," and all that kind. I had a friend

that's a fisherman in Hilo get me the sashimi and everything. I thought I was going to be the winner . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

WN: And what did your nephew make?

SY: Oh, fancy-kind sushi, and those things.

WN: Oh.

SY: And the uniform, they had. The fishing tournament was awesome, too. We had all kinds of [categories]: biggest fish, most fish, unusual fish, and fish story (laughs). And the person that won the biggest fish was my sister-in-law from Honolulu. Never fished in her life, and she caught one *hage*.

WN: This is from shore fishing or . . .

SY: Yeah, all bamboo shore fishing—caught the biggest fish (chuckles).

WN: So all bamboo poles.

SY: All bamboo, and down here get lot of fish. *Hage*, like that.

WN: What is *hage*?

SY: That black fish. Catch 'em by the dozen.

WN: Okay.

SY: So me, I wanted a trophy, so you know these guys catching the biggest fish already, some they catch the smallest fish, or most unusual fish. I thought, eh, I got to do something. I got to do something different, so I say, "Hey, tonight I going catch the most fish." So *hīnālea* and one other fish, I caught about sixty or seventy of them.

WN: (Laughs) All rubbish fish, eh?

SY: All rubbish (laughs). But I got that prize. I couldn't let those guys go home with all the trophies.

(Laughter)

WN: How long did this tournament last?

SY: Ten years.

WN: Yeah?

SY: But it ended because the person who was in charge of setting up the camp and everything—my brother—he passed away. I thought the wife was going to take over, but she didn't have time. But we had our days. That was fun.

WN: So tell me what was the store like, Yamagata Store.

SY: Yamagata Store was not only general merchandise, she went into material, and oranges were sold in the store too. In fact, the oranges had their own place in the veranda. We had a rack made just for the oranges; people would just stop and buy the oranges.

WN: How did you sell the oranges, by the orange or by the pound or what?

SY: I think by amount, you know, maybe six for so much. We weren't making too much money, but just to—people would come around. The market wasn't wholesaled outside. Then my father came out with an idea that he wanted to [produce] the coffee from cherry all the way to roasting, so he set up [equipment] to process his [coffee] right through, because a lot of people don't go right through. People go through the cherry and they sell the cherry, or before roasting anyway. Those days, you know, people didn't go to the stage where you roast the coffee, because it's so many stages, but he made it right through.

And then, his other invention was his roasting machine. Today they have those fancy roasters, but those days they never had those machines, so he did another thing again. He got a fifty-gallon drum, drill holes all over, and then he had one door-like and he put the green beans inside and he had gas stoves, two stoves underneath, slow flame. That machine was rotating, but it took two to three hours to get them to the stage of brown because he had no way of knowing when the thing was going to be ready. So he would sit over there for two, three hours, just to see that the beans are ready. Just patiently sitting, stop the motor, check on it, stop the motor, and check on it. So, he had that stage set already. He had the coffee roasted now.

WN: How much could he roast at one time?

SY: Hundred pounds.

WN: A hundred pounds at once?

- SY: Yeah, one bag. I remember. And then he wanted to package the roasted coffee, you know, but the next step after the roasting was, you have to grind the thing down to small little coffee [bits] that he can use for drinking. So I don't know where he got the machine from, but somehow he got the machine and he set it up in the store. So this was another job for us: to feed the roasted coffee in the top and it goes down and grind, grind, grind and made it. He had to blow out the waste and somehow made it so that only the roasted [coffee] came out.
- WN: He used to roast and grind.
- SY: Yeah, right through. Then he came up with this thing here that he want to package the finished product, so he came up with this idea and his original [label].
- WN: (Reading label) "Crown Kona Coffee."
- SY: Crown, yeah. Nobody else has it.
- WN: He sold it only in the store?
- SY: Yeah, mostly in the store.
- WN: Was it one-pound package?
- SY: Yeah, one pound, pure Kona coffee.
- WN: That's already ground up or is it in the [whole] bean?
- SY: No, ground up.
- WN: All ground up. Wow.
- SY: His dream was to go all the way, so he did.
- WN: He was one of the only ones that sold it in that form, ready to take home?
- SY: I don't know. Maybe some people had, but not too many those days. But this decal is registered, so nobody has that.
- WN: Crown Coffee.
- SY: Yeah, it's a beautiful one. I don't know how he got the idea.
- WN: Who would buy the coffee? Local people?

- SY: Oh yeah, local people and tourists. Tourists used to stop by because of the oranges, we displayed the oranges. A lot of tourists.
- WN: Would other stores sell parchment or green coffee or anything like that? Coffee in those days was mainly payment.
- SY: I think in those days, not too many people went into this business. The stores, they do business, they have to pay their debt and exchange. Most of them went that way, I think.
- WN: Now, did people pay your father in coffee, cherry or parchment?
- SY: Yeah, I remember we had one Japanese family that was our neighbor and I used to go pick up their coffee and in exchange they bought a lot of merchandise. They exchanged coffee for merchandise. Most of our customers were Filipino [workers] because we had about fifty people [working for us]; they would come day and night. Early in the morning, late at night. Because if the store is closed, they would go in the back, knock at the door. We cannot refuse them, so we service them.
- WN: So they would work for you folks, and then you folks would pay them, and then they would come to your store for their goods.
- SY: Yeah. Another thing, those Filipinos, whoever live with us, never paid any rent. They were all free. They were well taken care of. We had guys working for us for fifty years, they said, "If I'm gonna die, I'd rather die over here." They're part of the family already. Every time we had problems, like the cattle running away, I just go to the guy. "Can you help me go round up the cattle?"
- "Okay, let's go." You know, we had that kind of relationship with those guys.
- WN: Did you folks have anything like get-togethers or anything together with the Filipino workers?
- SY: I don't remember getting together like that, no. But sometimes, you know, when we have a party or something, we just tell them to come down, but they'd hesitate.
- WN: You mentioned cattle, how did that work? How did the cattle business . . .
- SY: Well, the cattle came in because coffee industry was down to the bottom. To maintain the seventy acres, the grass was over-rotting . . .
- WN: This was when, after the war?
- SY: This is after the war. The grass was growing wild, the price of coffee wasn't good, so my father, to get the expense down, he's going to raise cattle. Cattle was pretty good those

days. So, we started off with Holstein, that's the milking cattle. So we bought calves and then finally . . .

WN: From Ackerman.

SY: Yeah, finally we got about ten head of cattle. Then, he kept one as a bull. Then the thing just multiplied, multiplied. At the end, we had about seventy heads of cattle. Then we switched over to Herefords.

WN: So you started with dairy and you ended up with beef cattle. Okay, with the dairy cattle, what did you do with the milk?

SY: Well, we didn't milk them.

WN: Oh, you didn't milk them.

SY: But, I was the only one that milked it, one cow, because she had so much milk. I know why I had to do that, because I was in an ag [agriculture] class (laughs) and my project was cattle. So to improve my grade I had to do something, so I milked a cow. We drank those milks; the cow would give about a gallon or so milk every day. And the extras, had pigs, oh you feed the milk to the pigs and they would grow in no time. Beautiful pigs came out, piglets, so that's the reason why we had cattle. Today we still got cattle.

WN: Oh yeah, you still got? Oh, and who did you sell the cattle to?

SY: We had slaughtering places to sell to, and price was good those days. But today, I don't know why, but you go to the supermarket, the price is high. But when we sell them to the market, it's just about zero. Today you can go down here and I would sell you one steer, say about 500 pounds on the hoof, for \$200 to \$300. But when you convert that to supermarket price, that thing worth over \$1,000.

WN: Somebody's making money, eh?

(Laughter)

WN: What about the pigs? Same thing?

SY: I don't know why we got into the pig business (laughs), but the pigs weren't corralled. We just let them go in the field, what they did was, they just like *hō hana* the field, turn the dirt over. That's the reason why I think we had all those pigs. We had lot of pigs those days.

WN: You would slaughter the pigs, too? You would sell the pigs?

SY: People would come from all over, but they wanted something not kept in the house, something that would pick up weight right away. Because once in the field, they can eat anything. Domestic kind, they're particular on the food. Sometimes you give them papaya, "What is this?" and they won't eat it. But the pigs out in the field, you can give them anything. Grass and everything, they would eat. And when you slaughter it, the meat is different.

WN: Better or . . .

SY: Oh, better. Yeah, not all that fat. They get fat, then meat, then fat; all layers, like bacon.

WN: Did you sell any of the beef or the pork in the store?

SY: No, only market, it's too much trouble.

WN: Tell me again, what you folks sold in the store. I know you said dry goods.

SY: Dry goods, okay.

WN: And what? Canned goods.

SY: Oh yeah, mostly canned goods and material, oranges, coffee, and that's about it.

WN: Nothing perishable.

SY: I don't think so, but I remember we just carried a lot of pastries. That was a main item.

WN: From where?

SY: From the bakery, they would come deliver.

WN: Oh, which bakery?

SY: I think was Kona Bakery and Standard [Bakery]. Because we had a lot of Filipinos, their main dish was pastry. You know, [before going] to the coffee fields, just pick up pastry and that's your lunch already. And had a lot of *bagoong* and codfish, and that's the main thing you got to have in the store: codfish and *bagoong*. And *ebi*. You know, *ebi* with *shōyu* and rice, that's all you need. *Takuan*. That's the kind stuff we had in the store.

WN: Where did you guys get the *takuan*?

SY: I don't know, somebody used to come sell. Maybe Amfac guys used to come around.

WN: So you got all your goods from Amfac? Like canned goods and things.

- SY: Yeah, but my days was Y. Hata. They used to come. *Chūmon-tori*, they used to come, take orders. But my father's days was all Amfac, I think.
- WN: You said most of the time the customers were the Filipino workers, and I know you folks sold oranges, they didn't come and buy oranges though, right?
- SY: Oranges, no.
- WN: So it's mostly tourists buying the oranges?
- SY: Yeah. It's a small quantity going to the tourists, but most of them we had to ship them out to Honolulu, all over. They used to go out, by the truckload they used to ship them out. So we had to make the crates and everything.
- WN: It wouldn't make sense for a Kona person to come buy oranges, yeah?
- SY: We used to give them. You know, when the oranges getting a little too old or something, "Here, take 'em home."
- WN: Kind of like selling mangoes, yeah? I see.
- SY: Betty's parents were fishermen, commercial, sell fish and all that.
- WN: You folks didn't sell fish in your store?
- SY: I don't remember selling any fish.
- WN: And you said that some people would pay in coffee, what else did they pay with? Did they pay with anything else?
- SY: I don't think so. In fact, if I remember correctly a lot of them couldn't pay at the end already. My father just let it float; he didn't bother to chase after them or anything. I know when the economy came better, people used to come around and thank him. New Year's they used to come, "*Dōmo arigatō*" for all the things he did for them, because they were struggling with their own family, right? So my father was able to help, he helped them. He was well known around here.
- WN: So when the Filipinos would come to the store, they would pay what, cash?
- SY: No.
- WN: Charge?
- SY: Charge.

WN: Charge, I see. Most people charged then?

SY: Easy for them, the ending of coffee season you don't have too much money because those days the pickers made about five dollars, ten dollars a bag. Not like today, they make forty, so they had to drag their money. But, the money didn't last too long with the Filipinos because with a pool hall over here, Filipinos they like to gamble, you know. Whatever money they had, they played cards, shoot craps, or whatever. But they were happy. Quite a few went back to the Philippines, came back with their wives.

WN: Did you go hang around the pool hall?

SY: I was too young. The guy that was in charge of the pool hall was a Filipino guy and he's a fat guy, couldn't hardly move, he wouldn't let us go in.

WN: Even the boss's kids (chuckles).

SY: He respected my father's wishes, "Don't let those kids in." So we used to sneak in sometimes, the pool hall. But one of my brothers Nobuji, was one of the best players in Kona. He played just about the best people over here, but he practiced a lot (laughs). He was the black sheep of the family, you know. He didn't want to go to school; he would play music, he was sharp on the 'ukulele. All of us, we weren't talented, but he was the only one who wanted to play 'ukulele. And happy-go-lucky. Nobody came close to him, I think. [Once] when he went to Korea, he R&R'ed in Japan, but he couldn't make it to my uncle's place. My uncle was waiting for him in Tokyo, he called him up to say, "I'm sorry." It was his second R&R. He knew his time was coming up, so he really out drinking and had fun, you no can blame him. So that's the way he went, happy-go-lucky.

WN: Did your parents stress education to you folks?

SY: Oh yeah, my father did. He was kind of disappointed (laughs), but we turned out okay. We didn't go to college or anything like that, but when you look at it, all my brothers, we did real good. Fire captain, manager of Coca-Cola, without education, because we knew hard work was the key. So, when I had my sixtieth birthday, I told my family and friends, "In order to be successful, sometimes education is good, but if you get a job and you don't do your job, people not going see what you can do." And take me for instance, I worked hard for Coca-Cola for eighteen years. Every day, I went to work six o'clock, came home seven, eight o'clock, that's every day, [including] Saturday. I thought I wasn't going to be compensated for it because I have no background, no education, no nothing. Coca-Cola is a big company, and Kona was growing, so I never dreamed the big boss would call me up and say, "Yama, I want you to be the manager."

So I told him, "I'm just a truck driver right now, I have no experience how to run [a business], I going get stuck."

He said, "No, we been watching you. Your community was proud of you, you took care of all your customers and all that." They came after me for three years, and finally the guy retired, they were waiting for him to retire. He went back to Hilo and then the opening was there. I thought, should I take it? So all the people said, "Take it, take it, we help you. No worry." So I took the job, I survived seven years and I retired.

WN: You were at Coca-Cola for what, eighteen years? Nineteen seventy-two to 1990, but before that you worked for Union Oil.

SY: Union Oil, right.

WN: Okay. Was there any plans to take over your father's . . .

SY: When I graduated I was really interested in farming, but things change because during the war, somebody had to run the farm. The second oldest, he was the quiet one. He didn't want to go out, find job, although he was a pretty good carpenter. Like me, I didn't have no background or anything, no more experience, nothing. So I felt that, you know, since he didn't want to go out, so I went out and got a job. The best job I got was with Union Oil Company. So he stepped in, ran the farm, and did a good job. I was with Union Oil for fifteen years and I wasn't getting anywhere. I realized I had no future over there.

WN: Time to move on, yeah?

SY: So the next day a Coca-Cola guy came to where I was working. I said, "You get any job opening?"

"Yeah, I get one job opening."

I said, "When can I start?"

"Tomorrow," he told me (laughs). I walked in Coca-Cola, just that moment because I can drive trucks; I was driving trucks for almost thirty years. But within the thirty years I never had one accident, not one. Fifteen and eighteen, thirty-three years. You know, in the thirty-three years, I never rested from work. One day, I had the flu, I go down. I work half a day, finish my route, come home, sweat it out. Next morning I figure I can't go to work. But I was perfect; no fever, no nothing, back to the job. If I miss a day, they'd have to double up or triple up. That thing was bothering me, but people cannot believe thirty-three years, no rest. Every day on the job, I couldn't believe I did that (laughs).

WN: So today now, your father's lands are pretty much still intact, so you're taking care? You and your brothers, or just you?

SY: What happened was, my father was smart enough to, before he got too old, he subdivided the land already. All the brothers had shares, okay, this is your section here; this is your section. We were given those lands already.

WN: So how much do you have now?

SY: Well, right now, let's see, over here, one and a half, two. In fact, I had a big lot in Kainaliu, twelve-acre land, but that land was no coffee on it. But he gave it to me, so I have those lands, but right now I have turned the land over to my daughter. I gave her portion of the land already, and they build their homes up there. And I have a few more here and there, but now I have my grandsons coming up, so I'm giving them. Before I sell anything, I'm going to give it to them already. I still have my house and lot.

WN: What happened to the store building and your house?

SY: The store was demolished because termites were getting into it. And when you have been in a store, nobody living in it, it runs down real fast, I notice that. And the thing was leaning on the highway already. So what we did was get a bulldozer and just push it down the cliff.

WN: This was about, what, 1990?

SY: Down there was all leased land. Yeah, this was leased land.

WN: Oh, the land that the store was on?

SY: Yeah. So, my nephew bought it.

WN: Oh, leased from who?

SY: Smith.

WN: Smith? Oh, okay. So you folks own all the *mauka* lands. I see.

SY: The land was leased, but the person who owned the land, died. Left the wife with (the land and later on, she put it on sale).

WN: How many acres?

SY: A hundred-and-ten acres.

WN: Wow.

SY: And prime land. That land is all dirt, you know, and rocks is all piled because [it was once] plantation land. So, my brother, he didn't have the money so he called my nephew up. He was in the insurance business. So he talked to him, and he just went to the bank and he just borrowed the money, and he was owner of 110 acres.

WN: So is that what's happening in Kona now? Like, you know, next generations of the original pioneers that owned land are selling or giving it to their kids.

SY: Yeah, most of them did that.

WN: So what do you think the future of Kona is gonna be like?

SY: The way I look at it now, it's going to be bright. It's going to be real good, but all I can say to the young generation is, get a good education. Today, you just can't be an ordinary guy because everything is going so fast, you got to know what you doing, you got to look into the future. Technology today is, well, you know for yourself. If you just a farmer, you not going get ahead.

WN: So how different was it your time?

SY: Well, our time, you can get by because, like us, we were fortunate we had everything all set up already by our grandparents and Daddy. Because if we had to do it on our own, I don't know. To buy this lot like this here, it's going to set you back. But the ones like my brother, he gave it to his sons; they have land up here now. Parents over here, they subdivide it to the sons and so we are ahead already, so they get jobs, they don't have to struggle that much. But if they're getting old, they sell their land, not looking ahead for the next generation. They're going to struggle because to buy one lot and put up a house, that's a big, big issue. Set you back; all your life you going to be paying. Like my daughter was fortunate because I gave her five acres; all they had to do was borrow the money to build the house, right?

WN: One last question, you know as you look back, and you're telling me all the hard work you folks did and the different things your father did and the things you did to help out, what did you learn from all this?

SY: Well, what I really learned from my father is you got to always look ahead. Do your best; you just can't get anything for free, you got to work for it. Even right now, I'm retired; I can't just stay home and just watch TV. I could just sell my land and retire on that income or something, but the way I was brought up I try to follow my father's footstep to make things easier for my daughter, my grandson, and whatever comes after that. I don't want them to struggle like some families I see. No matter how hard they work, they can't get ahead because the seed wasn't planted right for them. The parents, maybe, wasn't looking ahead for them. They sell all their land, you know, like other

people, bang, bang, bang. They sold the land, and they have nothing today, and the kids today got to go into rentals, condos, and it's hard for them. Look how free I am, I live over here, I'm not in a subdivision where your houses are five feet away and you're not free like us. No problems, I can make all the noise I want, you know.

(Laughter)

WN: Well, what I notice, I come from Honolulu, it's a very crowded place. I come here, over here land seems to be really, really important to you folks.

SY: Yeah, without land you're nobody. You got to struggle.

WN: Like you said, you could just sit back and sell all your land and live off that, but you're not doing that.

SY: No, never would sell. We're old already; what I'm trying to do now is enjoy my grandkids, enjoy life little bit. Go Las Vegas, appreciate what my dad and grandpa did. And I like to educate [the next generations], and that's the reason why I keep all these pictures because they don't know. The ones born today, they don't know anything about what happened. Why they sitting pretty today. I just want to tell them it's not because of me. It's because of what these people [i.e., previous generations] did for us.

WN: Okay. That's a good place to end. Thank you very much.

SY: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Kona Heritage Stores Oral History Project

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